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## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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### RUSSIA AND THE BALTIC STATES: SOME RESULTS AND A FEW PERSPECTIVES

*N. Mezhevich\**



*Russia has a vested political interest in the eastern Baltics; yet acting upon this interest is either difficult or altogether impossible when it comes to the Baltic states. For 20 years, the Russian Federation has been actively promoting a model of mutually beneficial cooperation. Anti-Russian discourse of the Baltic states political elites, driven by their own wish to maintain political monopoly, halts most co-operation efforts.*

*It is time to accept that the previous model of cooperation with the Baltic states is now irrelevant, and that these states now form the avant-garde of anti-Russian movement; whether they will or, indeed, shall be held accountable for that is another unanswered question. The author of this article believes that the current model is unprecedented and failing so, it is unwise to speak of its long-term application.*

*The aim of this study is to draw some conclusions on the 25 years of intergovernmental relations between Russia and the Baltic states. The author uses a number of cross-disciplinary methods and relies heavily on the method of historical analysis. It is concluded that there are circumstances rendering mutual cooperation impossible, however beneficial such cooperation may seem. Conservation of the current political system will inevitably lead to economic stagnation in the Baltic states. If external pressures continue to rise and relations with Russia continue to deteriorate, destruction of economic and political systems of the neighboring states may become a reality.*

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Russian interests in the Baltic Sea region are a long-term priority of the country's foreign policy. They emerged and developed long ago and proved more stable than the state itself (under any of its many ephemeral names).

Contemporary Russian policy in this region can be traced back to the times of Kievan Rus. In the Novgorod feudal republic, Baltic policy was the cornerstone of international political and economic relations. In Novgorod, communication with other states led to the emergence of several important practical approaches to international cooperation, some of which are listed below.

1) Since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, treaties between the Novgorod Republic and Sweden contained clear rules of bilateral trade, identified the legal status of warehouses and other facilities, and specified the scope and mandate of writs granting privileges and protection, etc.

2) Treaties between the Novgorod Republic and the Livonian order contained detailed descriptions of state border demarcation, i. e. showed a trend towards the contractual formalisation of border delimitation.

3) Administrative and economic activities in the Novgorod and Pskov feudal regions were strongly influenced by the western European (Hanseatic, German, and Scandinavian) legal and economic systems.

4) Despite their focus on trade relations, Novgorod and Pskov retained the ability to repel attacks from the West. The years 1240 and 1242 proved that an effective economic regime could not survive without sufficient military and political support.

In the times of the Novgorod feudal republic — largely under the influence of the Western partners — the Russian state was integrated into the system of international political and economic relations.

The historical significance of Russian Baltic and Scandinavian policies lies in that the continuity of state independence was never broken in this area, even during feudal fragmentation and the Mongol Invasion.

A key feature of the Russian Baltic policy was its strong economic bend. As early as the 12—13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the priorities of economic partnership overshadowed the needs of territorial expansion. This becomes especially clear if one studies the Novgorod acts of the 12—15<sup>th</sup> centuries collected by S. N. Valk [1] and V. L. Yanin [2].

Regional systems of international relations are typically characterized by having a relatively large number of actors on a rather small territory. However, this has not always been true for the regions in question. Consider this quote, “His Imperial Majesty the Emperor of Russia, His Imperial Majesty the Emperor of Germany and Prussia, His Majesty the King of Denmark, and His Majesty the King of Sweden desire to strengthen the bonds of amity and good neighbourhood between their states thus granting universal peace... If any events shall threaten the territorial order in the countries of the Baltic Sea, the four undersigned governments shall enter into communication to agree upon the measures that would be deemed effective in supporting the said order” [3, p. 400]. It shows that a little more than a century ago the map of the region looked rather different. In effect, two empires shaped the system of international relations in the region. The *status quo* sa-



tified all the parties. Qualitative changes on the political map could occur only if the German and Russian Empires were to disintegrate at the same time, which they ended up doing in 1917—1918.

Our analysis is based on the following assumptions:

- Russia has broad economic, military, and political interests in the Baltic region. These interests are rather evident, even if they are not acknowledged by the countries in question, and include territories lying at a distance of thousands of kilometres from their borders.

- Economic interests are further fuelled by the fact that a significant proportion of Russian external trade (including that with non-Baltic partners, for instance, the US, Canada, and Cuba) is conducted via the Baltic Sea. The Kaliningrad exclave gets its supplies this way; gas is exported to Europe through the Nord Stream offshore pipeline.

- Opportunities to promote these interests largely depend on the degree of cooperation with the neighbours in the region. Even in 2103—2014, almost 40% of Russian transit was handled by the ports of the Baltics. Twenty years ago, this proportion was twice as high.

- Since 1993 — when the official foreign policy was first formulated in the eponymous document — said policy has been perceived differently in the Baltics and Finland. While *de jure* the countries express a joint opinion on the referendum in Crimea, they use different political rhetoric and do not have a single perspective on the prospects of the conflict and their roles in it. Russia, on the other hand, in its founding foreign policy document has a single vision of relations with partners in the East Baltic. So the problem remains: Russian current foreign policy is perceived differently in Finland and the Baltics.

- Russia has to find such ways to promote its interest in the region that would be in line with the country's current opportunities and the present system of political and economic relations in the world and in Europe. It is also important to take into account that the Baltics foreign policy towards Russia and Russia's foreign policy towards the Baltics are projections of the European vector of international relations. In recent years, a lot of scholars have been speaking of the unique prognostic function of the Russo-Baltic relations. The current situation in between Russia and the Baltics is an approximation of the future of Russian-European relations. The removal of the Soviet war memorial in central Tallinn (Estonia) preceded the launch of the Eastern Partnership. The Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius (Lithuania) preceded the launch of destruction of the Ukrainian state and the hybrid war against Russia. There can be no doubt that the upcoming Eastern Partnership summit in Riga (Latvia) is going to be of significant importance [4].

- Unfortunately, despite common interests, Russian relations with its north-western neighbours, in particular, those in the Baltic region, remain rather complicated. The Baltic region, a border area for both Russia and the EU, is heavily affected by geopolitical changes. Therefore, the economic and political composition of the region should take into account the interests of the European Union and the Russian Federation. This is the only way to ensure sustainable economic development of the region.

This article considers the current condition and prospects for the economic and political development of the east Baltic States in the context of their cooperation with Russia. A specific feature of this area is that all of the region's modern states were once territories of the Russian Empire, in whole or in part (the Republic of Poland). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Russia remain neighbours. Being neighbours geographically is one thing, political and economic cooperation is another, more significant, matter. Over the past 24 years, the region has seen changes not only on its political maps, but also in certain cooperation models that have developed between the states of the east Baltics.

It would be a simplification to distinguish between two models of relations between Russia and its neighbours in the east Baltics. One model is used in Moscow-Helsinki relations, the second in the Baltics-Russia relations. These relations are conducted on conditions of openness in foreign trade and growing partnership between Russian and the EU. Although economic, political, and legal frameworks are formally the same, both economic and political relations between Russia and Finland differ considerably from those between Russia and the Baltics. In our opinion, this situation was triggered by the policies of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that ignore objective economic logic of mutually beneficial relations.

A constant emphasis on objective historical problems fulfils the function of preserving the anti-Russian sentiment at the level of elites, which convert Russophobic rhetoric into political and, to a degree, economic capital. At the same time, Russia is committed to the depoliticisation of economic cooperation, joint efforts to solve regional problems, and taking discussion on complicated issues from the political to the expert level. It is worth stressing that this process requires mutual participation, which is hardly the case today, nor did it really happen in the past.

It is also worth noting that “the conscious distortion of the essence of the past and current relations between Russia and the Baltics has always been an integral part of the major attack on Russian history” [5]. One might see it as an exaggeration. In this context, it is worth quoting an eminent author: “To make themselves the master of memory and forgetfulness is one of the great preoccupations of the classes, groups, and individuals who have dominated and continue to dominate historical societies” [6]. This is not a quote from an Orwell novel, but an opinion voiced by the French historian and sociologist Jacques Le Goff. Indeed, one cannot but notice that, in the Baltics, historical works are sometimes not only written by professionals — historians and political scientists — but also published as official government materials [7], which are often prepared by acting politicians of the highest ranks. Thus, groundwork for an ideology is laid. E. Ponomareva and L. Shishelina stress that “of course, one can understand historical traumas, understand different attitudes to different dramatic events. However, today, one cannot justify reproducing a distorted, negative image of a neighbouring country and its people, animosity and antipathy towards them, as well as conscious deviation from the truth in presenting and assessing historical events and processes” [8].



Of course, there are lawyers, historians, and political scientists in the Baltics who have an independent view on the events of 1918—1920 and 1939—1940 [9; 10]. Yet the prevalent view is a different, official interpretation based on the selective succession principle, occupation doctrine, and ostentatious anti-Russian sentiment [11—13].

The stance taken by Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius in their dialogue with Russia is not consistent with the countries' economic and political opportunities. United Europe is not inclined to radicalise relations with Russia according to the Lithuanian scenario, which nevertheless is supported on both sides of the Atlantic and, thus, is promoted through several countries of new Europe, predominantly the Baltics.

The President of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves (then Minister of Foreign Affairs), clearly formulated his vision of Russia: "...there is no one in the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who is interested in the neighbourhood with Russia. The future relations with the West are our main concern" [14].

This motto won him the Presidency. However, in Russia, this thesis was not heard by everyone. Reports were prepared by the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy and a number of affiliated structures [15—20]. These documents almost ignored the negative experience of Russian-Estonian Relations. Only after the removal of the Bronze Soldier memorial and the 2008 hostilities in Ossetia, the deadlock in the Baltics-Russia relations became evident. An analysis of current practices in the Baltics-Russian relations shows that the Baltics increasingly become part of the political periphery.

In these conditions, Russia should not react to slight changes in the foreign policies of its neighbours. One should welcome the steps taken by the partners towards adjusting and solving the most acute problems. A good example is Estonia taking steps towards the ratification of a border treaty under mutually agreed terms. However, one should not jump at conclusions. Russia should seek a general adjustment in the neighbours' foreign policy towards pragmatic cooperation without looking for a compromise over key political and economic issues.

Russia should treat elements of inadequate perception of the country leniently. Certain stages of Russian history and foreign policy development do not comply with modern international law. At the same time, there is a need to oppose all attempts to convince Russian and international public of the responsibility of Russia and its citizens for the actions taken by the USSR in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Russia needs to safeguard all formal and nonformal characteristics of state sovereignty. This general principle holds especially true for the Baltic Sea region, which serves as a platform for political processes posing a direct threat to Russian interests.

In the conditions of emerging economic and political uncertainty in Europe and in the world, there is an increasing need to position Russia as an integral part of European civilisation and a natural ally of the major European integration association.

The concept of “missed opportunities” cannot be used as a reproach to Russian neighbours. There is a need to treat certain common history events equitably and overcome historical phobias. The experience of Finnish-Russian relations proves that it is possible.

When analysing the speeches of top politicians and experts from Germany, France, Italy, and the UK, one encounters different opinions and attempts to carry out a comprehensive analysis of complicated processes resulting in the crisis in the EU-Russia relations. However, Tallinn, Riga and, in particular, Vilnius aim to develop a unified position on foreign policy issues. Members of the Latvian Harmony party and the Estonian Centre Party, who expressed cautious doubts as to the soundness of the unambiguous assessment of the current processes, were all but accused of high treason.

The implementation of Russian interests in relations with the Baltics is forestalled only by the Baltics. Russian diplomats and experts are understandably weary of the general trends observed in the Baltics-Russian relations over the past 25 years. However, despite this disappointment, Russian interests have to be well structured, moreover, there is a need for a state policy that would be clear to Russia and its neighbours.

In the context of Russian interests in the Baltics, one should consider the evolution of Russian foreign policy concepts. The first one was adopted in 1993, the last one in 2013 [21—23]. Twenty years constitute a period that can be considered not only in terms of policy, but also in terms of history. The 1993 concept has a page and a half dedicated to the Baltics — as many as to the USA. However, the 2013 concept does not mention the Baltics. Instead, it focuses on the Baltic Sea region. The page had been turned. The Baltic States, Russian geographic neighbours, are not mentioned in the concept, but Australia is. The period when Russia was ready to make a step towards its partners and offer a mutually beneficial dialogue even through trade-offs seems to have ended.

When considering Russian interests in the Baltics (the major issue) and those of the Baltics in Russia (a secondary issue for Russia), one should take into account both spatial and historical contexts. Otherwise, it is difficult to structure these interests and almost impossible to answer the question as to what problems hinder their implementation.

In theoretical terms, “against the background of political and economic stereotypes, there is a possibility of the Baltics abandoning single-vector foreign policy for the multi-vector model, i. e. unlocking the potential of traditional geographical and historical ties” [24]. This option cannot be excluded. A diplomat is a person who never says never (otherwise, they are not a diplomat). Diplomacy is not only an area of human activity, but also — ideally — an art. However, for the political elites of the Baltics, Russia remains “an external, alien to Europe state — a Siberian Nigeria or Algeria.” Therefore, “it seems logical to pursue an egoistic policy towards Russia, which resolves into gaining access to its raw materials and transit routes, depriving the country of natural competitive advantages, and simultaneous avoidance of possible ‘soft security’ risks” [25].



In conclusion, it is worth stressing that Russian state interests can be structured as follows:

- formalising the state border between Russia and the Baltics, i. e. the ratification of the border treaty with Estonia;
- developing transport and energy infrastructure in the Kaliningrad exclave, which may prompt more effective cooperation with the Baltics. With Polish support, Lithuania has virtually blocked the construction of the Baltic NPP. However, it did not and could not facilitate the construction of an NPP in the country.
- protecting the rights of ethnic Russians in the Baltics as a crucial and long-term objective of the Russian policy in the region. This policy extends to both ethnic Russians and Russian citizens permanently residing in the Baltics.
- developing cooperation in the framework of regional organisations. These international organisations should not turn into a platform for coordinating anti-Russian policy.

The Baltics are a very inconvenient object for cooperation; however, any positive result in this area will serve as convincing evidence of the general efficiency of Russia's foreign policy, at least, of its European vector.

In compliance with the rules and practices of international law, the Baltic States are to be considered equal and important partners, which suggests equal responsibility of partners. This concerns the political statements of the president of Lithuania, and the marches of SS veterans in Riga on March 16, 2015, and such practical actions as the NATO military parade in the Estonian city of Narva 250 km from the Russian border on February 24, 2015.

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